

Balancing Kitchen and Cubicle: Neoliberal Precarity in Twenty-First Century Indian English Women Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry is a dynamic, creative-critical locus where imagined and experiential realities converge. In the last decade, Indian English women poets have broadened their horizons to encompass the so-called 'unfeminine' and 'unpoetic' terrains of urban routine like unemployment, corruption and violence. The paper examines twenty-first century Indian English women poetry through the lens of Marxist feminism. It compares classical Marxist feminist formulations with their contemporary reconfigurations to understand the changing contours of labour, value and emancipation under neoliberal capitalism. Early Marxist feminists located women's subordination primarily in their exclusion from the wage labour and private property ownership. The paper argues that capitalist extractions operate in factories, corporate offices and commuter trains too. Within this framework, emancipation that was tied to women's entry into productive labour and participation in market exchange stand contested as such inclusions do not essentially eradicate capitalism but simply reconfigure it. By juxtaposing earlier Marxist feminist emphasis on production with contemporary Marxist feminists' attention to intersectionality, the paper demonstrates multiple ways in which Indian English women poetry expands Marxist feminist thought beyond the typical industrial paradigm. It exposes the limitation of the universal 'worker' figure proposed by classical Marxism and repositions gendered exhaustion, care crisis and precarious labour as central to understanding neoliberal capitalism in the Indian scenario.

Keywords: Indian English, Capitalism, Extraction, Marxism, Neoliberal, Women

Introduction

The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels foregrounds the inextricability of material forces and political structures, positing that control over the means of production consolidates class hierarchy and facilitates the extraction of surplus value from the proletariat. While classical Marxist feminism concentrated primarily on wage labour and industrial production, later Marxist feminist interventions exposed the invisibility of labouring, subaltern, reproductive and domestic women within the capitalist discourses. As Armstrong observes, "Behind every capitalist social relation – that of the capitalist and the worker – lay another buried social relation, that of the household – between husband and the wife" (3). Women's unpaid domestic labour in the form of cleaning, cooking, caregiving and childbearing thus emerges not as a cultural residue outside capitalism but as its intrinsic infrastructure. Early Marxist feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Clara Zetkin located women's subordination largely in their exclusion from wage labour and private property ownership, arguing that economic participation would enable emancipation. However, this framework now seems obsolete as the incorporation of women into productive labour has not dismantled the

patriarchal-capitalist structure but simply reconfigured it within the neoliberal regimes of flexibility and precarity. Contemporary Marxist feminist thought shifts attention from production alone to the interlocking domains of social reproduction, care work along with intersectional hierarchies of caste, class and gender. Beneria and Sen note, “the close connection between processes of accumulation and changes in women’s work and forms of their subordination” is pivotal to capitalism (288). It is within this expanded theoretical terrain that twenty-first-century Indian English women’s poetry becomes particularly significant. Far from merely responding to exploitation, these poems interrogate the crisis of social reproduction under neoliberal capitalism. The domestic sphere, corporate office, commuter train and informal labour site appear as interconnected spaces of extraction. Mamta Kalia’s poem “Anonymous” for instance does not simply portray the melancholy of a housewife but it exposes the repetitive temporality of unwaged reproductive labour:

I, no longer feel I’m Mamta Kalia
I’m Kamla or Vimla or Kanta or Shanta
I cook, I wash,
I bear, I rear,
I nag, I wag,
I sulk, I sag,
I see worthless movies at reduced rates.
I get a free plastic bucket with a large packet of super-surf and feel
Happy (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 26).

The rhythmic listing mirrors the mechanical reproduction of labour-power, while the erasure of the individual name underscores the subsumption of feminine subjectivity within domestic capitalism. The poem thus destabilises the classical Marxist emphasis on factory labour by revealing the home as a primary site of capitalist accumulation. By foregrounding gendered exhaustion, the devaluation of care and the precarious incorporation of women into both formal and informal economies, contemporary Indian English women poetry challenges the universal worker figure of classical Marxism. They show that European theories are not universal truths but historically and geographically specific frameworks that cannot be applied to all cultures. Indian women poets retheorise feminism within the evolving structures of neoliberal capital.

Marx observes, “The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instrument of production are to be exploited in common, and naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women” (17). The economic dependence of a woman on her husband intensifies the condition of exploitation, a reality poignantly illustrated in Imtiaz Dharker’s poem “Another Woman”. The protagonist’s anguish within “the house she had been sent to,” “the man she had been bound to,” and the “future she had been born into” underscores the structural entrapment of marriage as an institution that promotes female subordination. These phrases demonstrate coercion and not choice.

The poem captures the many ways in financial dependence reinforces patriarchal subjugation, rendering the woman voiceless within both domestic and economic structures. At the same time, rising inflation and intensified market competition have increasingly compelled dual-income households, drawing women into productive labour outside the home. Access to formal education and professional training has enabled many women to move beyond traditionally assigned roles of cooking, reproduction and caregiving. The emergence of nuclear families, reduced family size, labour-saving technologies and the availability of domestic help have further eased women’s participation in paid employment. Flexible working hours and financial incentives have also contributed to the growing presence of women in the workforce. Consequently, salaried employment has enhanced women’s bargaining power within the household, particularly in managing unforeseen expenses and contributing to decisions concerning family welfare and the future. Although working women may wield greater economic leverage than full-time homemakers, they remain entangled in culturally prescribed expectations of femininity and domestic responsibility. Thus, while the professional

sphere appears increasingly inclusive, the fundamental dynamics structuring masculine and feminine roles as well as the entrenched division between the inside and the outside remains largely unchanged.

A major obstacle to women's empowerment continues to be the persistent gender gap within the employment sector. Official statistics frequently suggest that economic reforms, concessional loans for women borrower and maternity benefits have facilitated women's participation in paid work. Calling the information "notoriously inaccurate", Jayati maintains, "given the nature of women's participation in economic activities, which involves a substantial amount of unpaid labour, overt participation in the labour market or in what is declared to be "economic activity" does not capture the full extent of women's work" (*Indian Women Revisited* 119). In other words, conventional metrics fail to account for the vast reservoir of unpaid and invisible labour performed by women. Furthermore, figures concerning women's presence in salaried employment often rely on journalistic surveys with limited sample sizes, addressing only fragments of a far more complex structural problem.

Even when women succeed in negotiating discriminatory hiring structures and enter the paid workforce, their incorporation into capitalist production does not dissolve gendered hierarchies but often reproduces them in new forms. Wage inequality, limited access to mentorship networks, exclusion from decision-making positions and the persistent threat of sexual harassment reveal that the labour market remains deeply stratified along gendered lines. From a Marxist feminist perspective, such patterns demonstrate that women's labour continues to be systematically undervalued within capitalist economies that rely upon yet devalue 'feminised' work. Marriage and maternity are constructed as disruptions to productivity, positioning women as unreliable workers within a profit-driven framework that privileges uninterrupted labour power. Consequently, women are compelled to constantly prove their competence in environments where their authority is doubted and their success is frequently interpreted as preferential treatment rather than earned advancement. Even institutional grievance mechanisms often replicate patriarchal suspicion, subjecting complainants to moral scrutiny instead of addressing structural inequities. Women aspiring to be leaders are cast as excessively ambitious or destabilising presences signalling how capitalist patriarchy polices female aspiration to safeguard entrenched masculine dominance.

The reconfiguration of work patterns in the post COVID-19 pandemic further intensifies this contradiction. The expansion of digital capitalism through constant connectivity, remote access and global time-zone integration has eroded the boundaries between work and home. While such flexibility is often celebrated as progressive, Marxist feminist analysis reveals how it facilitates the deeper penetration of capital into domestic space. The home, historically assigned as the site of reproductive labour, now doubles as an extension of the workplace thereby expanding the extraction of surplus value without reducing women's domestic responsibilities. Women thus positioned at the intersection of productive and reproductive labour are expected to augment household income while continuing to perform culturally naturalised tasks such as cooking, childcare, caregiving and emotional management. This dual burden illustrates what contemporary Marxist feminists like Nancy Fraser identify as the structural dependence of capitalism on unpaid reproductive labour, a form of labour that sustains the workforce yet remains unremunerated and invisible.

The demand to excel simultaneously in professional and domestic spheres exacts a significant physical and psychological toll thus revealing the limits of market-centred notions of empowerment. This contradiction between educational attainment and domestic subsumption is powerfully captured in Mamta Kalia's poem *Love Made a Housewife Out of Me*. The speaker exposes how the ideological promise of self-realisation through education and modernity is neutralised by the persistent feminisation of unpaid domestic labour:

I came with a degree in Textile Designing,
Skill in debates, dramatics and games
(You can see my certificates.) . . .
I now have a house
Full of you and your world
Unmade beds, dirty linen.

Papers wrongfolded. slippers thrown,
Bulging ashtrays,
Lidless tubes of toothpaste, hair crème,
Unwashed brushes,
Buttonless shirts, laceless shoes,
A sink full of plates,
And a head full of ache. (*Poems* ' 78 20)

In Marxist feminist terms, the speaker's professional identity is absorbed into the reproductive economy of the household, where her labour sustains others while effacing her own aspirations. Rather than signalling emancipation, her trajectory reveals how neoliberal capitalism appropriates women's education and employability without dismantling the patriarchal division of labour, thereby converting empowerment into an intensified, gendered precarity.

Women Poets and the Personal-Professional Dialectic

The metropolitan landscape occupies a central position in contemporary Indian English poetry where it is rendered not just as backdrop but as a structuring force of subjectivity under recent capitalism. The modern city with its neon glare, hoardings, asphalt roads, railway tracks and regimented schedules functions as a site of aspiration and estrangement, simultaneously. While it promises mobility and self-fashioning, it also produces anonymity, fatigue and commodified interaction. From a Marxist feminist perspective, the city becomes a spatial manifestation of neoliberal restructuring where labour is accelerated and value is measured through productivity. The older modes of sociability lingering conversations from balconies or terraces give way to hurried transit and instrumental exchange, revealing the erosion of community under the pressures of market rationality. As quoted in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Women Poets* this condition of urban alienation is evocatively captured by the male poet Manohar Shetty, who portrays an ageing office-goer perpetually short of time:

Bathed so long in this ring of light
I can now discern a recurring face
In those scudding hordes. I watch his
Worried brow, the perpetual brief-case
Weary with age, as he vanishes past
Too pressed for time to appreciate
My groomed slender frame, my glass blue eyes
Gleaming all day from my elevated place. (44)

The recurring figure of the anxious commuter embodies what Marx termed the subsumption of life under labour. In this scenario, existence is organised around work hence leaving little room for aesthetic appreciation or relational depth. The elevated observer in the poem watching the man vanish into "scudding hordes" mirrors the estrangement characteristic of capitalist modernity, where individuals appear as fleeting, interchangeable units within a mechanised crowd. The poem thus stages the city as a theatre of depersonalisation, where human presence is reduced to function. Similarly, another well-known male poet Gieve Patel, in "In Bombay" foregrounds the psychic violence of unemployment within an economy that equates dignity with waged labour. The unemployed gather in bureaucratic spaces where silence is prominent, forming fragile solidarities born of exclusion:

Unemployed, one make friends who
Are unemployed.
Picked up at the unemployment bureau

Where silence is articulate.
The unemployment dare not lose their temper.
Unemployed people try to sleep at any
Time of the day. (*Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Women Poets*, 46)

Marxist feminist critique reads this as the underside of neoliberal meritocracy. While employment promises inclusion, joblessness produces social invisibility and internalised self-loathing. The unemployed “dare not lose their temper,” revealing how economic precarity regulates affect itself. In a system where survival is contingent upon market participation, those outside formal labour structures are rendered surplus, their despair normalised.

For many contemporary Indian English women poets who themselves often inhabit professional roles as academics, editors or journalists the personal-professional tension is not abstract but lived. As Jasodhara Bagchi observes, modern patriarchy demands that women acquire the cultural capital of education without unsettling their domestic obligations. Education becomes a marker of refinement and social prestige, yet it simultaneously binds women to a reconfigured mode of subordination. From a contemporary Marxist feminist standpoint, this reflects capitalism’s adaptive capacity i.e. it incorporates women into the labour market while preserving the gendered division of reproductive labour. Emancipation is thus reframed as responsibility and professional achievement coexists with intensified domestic accountability. The experiential texture of this dual burden is poignantly rendered by Rukmini Bhaya Nair in the poem “Making Ends Meet”:

By women in queues, waiting
At city water-pumps, pulling
Buckets from mud-filled wells.
And by the woman who has nothing
Left for her child, for herself . . .
The lovely gold of her laugh
Trickles away, grey, stagnant. (*Yellow Hibiscus* 196-97)

The poem depicts women queuing at municipal water pumps, drawing buckets from “mud-filled wells” while their daily labour continues to be marked by scarcity and exhaustion. The image of “the lovely gold of her laugh” that “trickles away, grey, stagnant” symbolises the slow depletion of vitality under the weight of unpaid, repetitive chores. Marxist feminism identifies such domestic and community labour water collection, caregiving, sustenance work as foundational to the reproduction of labour power yet systematically excluded from economic valuation. The poem therefore destabilises the binary between productive and unproductive work, revealing how the personal sphere remains saturated with material labour essential to the functioning of the wider economy.

These poetic articulations illuminate the persistence of the personal-professional dialectic in neoliberal India. The city promises participation in modernity yet reproduces class and gender hierarchies and new forms of precarity. Contemporary Indian English women poetry thus performs a critical intervention within Marxist feminist debate by demonstrating that the crisis of work is inseparable from the crisis of care. In doing so, it challenges celebratory narratives of inclusion and compels a rethinking of emancipation beyond mere entry into the marketplace.

For centuries, socio-spatial regulation confined women within normative codes of chastity, decorum and desirability constructed through patriarchal authority. These disciplinary frameworks did not merely restrict mobility but produced a gendered consciousness in which women internalised the very stereotypes that marginalised them. Even educationally qualified women remained circumscribed by the belief that intellectual ambition or professional aspiration transgressed feminine propriety. From a Marxist feminist standpoint, such internalisation operates as an ideological apparatus that secures the reproduction of patriarchy without overt coercion. Women become complicit in sustaining the structures that subordinate them as

Charmayne D' Souza poetry shows. She protests against women's uncritical acceptance of pervasive fallacies like being unsuitable for intellectual or professional pursuits. In "The Rational Animal", she attacks people who may have "only a follicle of charm" and "only the sinecure of intelligence" but consider women as subordinates:

do you think a woman
Is still ready to sit upright
behind a desk,
or in a drawing room,
talking sensibly to a man?
Never. (*A Spelling Guide to Women* 2)

The poem intervenes in the long-standing philosophical tradition that privileged man as the "rational animal," reclaiming reason and speech as feminist terrains of resistance. In Marxist feminist terms, D'Souza disrupts the ideological naturalisation of male authority in knowledge production and professional space.

Over time, however women have increasingly asserted claims over material property, educational capital, productive resources and professional opportunities. They negotiate decisions concerning finance, marriage and reproduction with greater strategic agency. Yet this apparent expansion of choice unfolds within a neoliberal economy marked by shrinking job security and intensifying competition. In contexts of rising unemployment, both men and women may be compelled to compromise on the nature and remuneration of work but women remain structurally disadvantaged due to entrenched gender hierarchies. Access to employment does not translate into equitable participation rather labour markets remain stratified along gendered lines.

The division of labour in India continues to reflect deeply sedimented assumptions about physical strength, emotional disposition and intellectual capacity. Occupations associated with care, service and clerical assistance nursing, teaching, secretarial work, reception and cashiering are feminised and often undervalued. The positions imbued with authority, mobility or technical skill disproportionately remain male-dominated. This segmentation exemplifies what Marxist feminists identify as horizontal and vertical occupational segregation. Women are concentrated in specific sectors and simultaneously excluded from decision-making hierarchies within them. Professional inequality is thus sustained not merely through wage disparity but through the symbolic coding of certain jobs as "naturally" masculine or feminine. The masculine character of corporate culture further consolidates this imbalance. As Collinson and Hearn argue in *Men and Masculinities*, "the gurus of leadership studies are almost overwhelmingly 'successful' men, their much sought after prognostications for organization and individual 'success' tend to neglect the presence of women in the organizations and thus reinforce the particular gendered character of 'corporate culture'. This means that leadership discourse is overwhelmingly shaped by narratives of 'successful' men whose prescriptions for organisational achievement marginalise women's presence. Such discourses reproduce a gendered norm of authority, presenting male experience as universal while relegating women to the periphery of institutional power. From a contemporary Marxist feminist perspective, this reveals how capitalism and patriarchy operate symbiotically. It is interesting to note that the market incorporates women as labouring subjects yet its ideological and organisational frameworks continue to privilege masculine dominance.

Contemporary women poets incisively interrogate the entrenched prejudice that frames men as the 'natural' breadwinners while trivialising women's labour as supplementary or self-indulgent. The assumption that women seek employment merely for personal fulfilment rather than economic necessity or self-determination reveals a persistent patriarchal logic that equates masculinity with provision and femininity with dependence. Contemporary Marxist feminism holds that such a belief obscures the material realities of women's contribution to household economies and reinforces the ideological separation between productive and reproductive labour. The poetry of Arundhati Subramaniam and K.Srilita directly contests this skewed perception thus aptly foregrounding the embodied and emotional costs of women's participation in the

workforce. In “5.46 Andheri Local” Subramaniam delineates the journey of women commuting home after fulfilling their professional obligations. The suburban train often celebrated as an emblem of metropolitan mobility emerges instead as a contested space where access to the public sphere is mediated by exhaustion, vulnerability and surveillance. Public transport undeniably enables women to claim visibility in spaces of education, employment and leisure yet this mobility is accompanied by corporeal strain and gendered risk. The overcrowded compartment becomes a microcosm of urban patriarchy, where women returning from work must negotiate physical fatigue, menstrual discomfort or pregnancy alongside the omnipresent threat of harassment. Leering gazes, unsolicited proximity and covert or overt groping expose how the female body in transit is subjected to commodified scrutiny. The poet presents a poignant picture of exhausted women returning from work in a local train which is brimming with infection, odious smells, multi-hued clothes and contretemps:

In the women’s compartment
of a Bombay local
we seek
no personal epiphanies
Like metal licked by relentless acetylene
we are welded —
dreams, disasters,
germs, destinies,
flesh and organza,
odours and ovaries
A thousand-limbed
million-tongued, multi-spoused
Kali on wheels. (*Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Women Poets* 275-76)

Through such representations, the poets complicate celebratory narratives of urban modernity and female emancipation. The daily commute positioned within neoliberal discourse as evidence of empowerment reveals instead the layered precarity of working women whose labour does not exempt them from sexualised vulnerability. Marxist feminist analysis reads this as the contradiction of capitalist inclusion. Women are incorporated into the circuits of wage labour, yet the gendered disciplining of their bodies persists in public space. Mobility thus becomes both a sign of participation and a reminder of structural inequality underscoring that entry into the workforce does not automatically dismantle patriarchal power. Similarly, in “Womb Stories”, Srilata depicts an expectant mother whose baby is “growing limbs” and “toe-nails”. However, the picture becomes dismal as soon as the poet presents the travel-routine of this woman:

dreaming and
growing
smiling
rocked to sleep
by the bus I take
each day
in my working woman frenzy. (*Seablue Child* 42)

Dissension over the soaring price of food, clothing, utility items, fuel, education and property is part of everyday struggle of the middle class. An increased cost of living exercises an adverse impact on people of a low wage group. Disputes between an average Indian middle-class couple over rising expenditure is fittingly rendered by Mamta Kalia in the poem “New Deal”:

Let's together forget our horrors-in-law
"your never-enough" salary—
"my never-enough" needs.
Let's forget the doctor's bills
and the grocer's and the launderer's.
In short, let's forget
The proverbial thorn
And smell the proverbial rose. (*Tribute to Papa* 18)

The poet further discusses the problems of basic survival faced by an ordinary woman in "I do feel National" by weaving in it in the fabric of failed government policies of social welfare:

They in Delhi do not know
What it is to live like mice
I'll ever be a rebel
As long as I don't get
Sugar, Dalda and Kerosene oil
At fair price. (*Poems '78* 7)

Persistent wage disparity for equivalent labour and the systematic exclusion of women from senior positions constitute significant sources of professional frustration. Such inequities are often normalised within organisational cultures that continue to privilege masculine career trajectories as the standard. Equally problematic is the widely held assumption that a woman can seamlessly resume her professional life after childbirth provided, she possesses sufficient determination. This voluntarist narrative reduces structural constraints to matters of individual will thereby obscuring the material and ideological conditions that circumscribe women's choices. The nature of women's familial and domestic responsibilities presents them with multiple mutually-conflicting situations as "Studies of men's and women's employment across countries and cohorts expose two clear patterns: the work pathways of men and women diverge as parenthood approaches and diverges even further after childbirth . . . Overall, social stratification together with gender ideologies and work family constraints, shape women's employment belief and behavior" (McGin and Oh 84). In other words, parenthood functions as a structural turning point that reconfigures women's engagement with paid labour far more drastically than men's. The interplay of entrenched gender norms, unequal domestic expectations and limited institutional support systems produces a context in which women's professional continuity is persistently interrupted or recalibrated. From a contemporary Marxist feminist perspective, this divergence underscores the unresolved contradiction between productive and reproductive labour. While capitalism depends upon the reproduction of the workforce through caregiving and child-rearing, the responsibility for this labour remains disproportionately feminised and largely unremunerated. Consequently, women's employment trajectories are shaped not merely by personal aspiration but by the cumulative pressures of social stratification, workplace inflexibility and the ideological naturalisation of caregiving as women's primary obligation. The resulting tension reveals that formal access to employment does not guarantee substantive equality, as structural conditions continue to regulate and constrain women's economic participation.

The weight of domestic responsibility does not dissipate at the office threshold rather, it accompanies women as a persistent cognitive and emotional burden. Even within professional spaces, there remains a tacit reinforcement of the notion of women as primarily domestic agents rather than autonomous economic actors. As noted in *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice*, this ideological conditioning privileges women's familial roles over their productive capacities, ensuring that paid employment does not displace expectations of caregiving. From a Marxist feminist standpoint, such internalised prioritisation of the home

reflects the structural persistence of reproductive labour as women's 'natural' obligation, irrespective of their participation in wage work.

Women poets acknowledge that employment can enhance women's socio-economic standing and confer a measure of financial agency yet professional engagement frequently generates strain in one if not both, spheres of life. Subramaniam deliberates on how women wallow in self-pity, "When I descend / I could choose / to dice carrots/or a lover./I postpone the latter" (*Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* 278). K. Srilata in "On Being a Poet" submits a similar point, "Once the dust settles over / All my part-time lives / I will try to be a poet. / Write. / In undiluted time" (*Seablue Child* 67). The act of "dicing carrots" stands in for routine reproductive labour, quietly asserting its primacy over desire. The poem exposes how the rhetoric of choice under neoliberal modernity often conceals an unequal hierarchy of obligations. From a Marxist feminist lens, this dispersal illustrates the temporal exploitation embedded in the dual burden: women's time is appropriated by both capital and family, leaving little space for self-realisation.

The difficulty of negotiating these spheres intensifies when husbands, children and extended family members resist redistributing domestic responsibilities. Without structural or interpersonal accommodation, the expectation that women will seamlessly balance both domains becomes untenable. Consequently, working women often struggle to allocate time and resources equitably between household and career resulting in emotional fatigue and professional compromise. Mamta Kalia in "An Active Life" poignantly demonstrates how the demands of one sphere intrude upon and destabilise the other, revealing that the modern promise of "having it all" frequently translates into the relentless management of incompatible expectations:

(She worked hard so as to be
ahead of the class
by a page or two.)
In the lounge she sat every evening
criticizing Indira Gandhi
and swearing the dhobi had run away
this time with her clothes. (*Tribute to Papa* 14)

Even after almost three decades of liberalisation, a paradigmatic shift in gender roles seems to be only a theoretical assurance. The inherent conviction that women are less capable than men govern their attitude towards not only housewives but working women also. It can be seen not only in personal opinions but government policies too. For example, millennial women disapprove of the Indian government's decision (2016) to double the maternity leave for women upto 26 weeks because it is almost stating that child-care is the mainly the responsibility of women. "Lactating: Grace Period" by Srilata alludes to the contrariety of maternity leave which is nothing more than a stipulated time on paper as it does not take into account the physiological changes in a woman's body after childbirth:

On a short leash,
She had little time now for shells.
Her breasts were flying
But heavy with milk (*Seablue Child* 45)

The poet provides a telling commentary on the exhaustion and fatigue suffered by working mothers in another poem titled "Uma":

Home is
having to do my Friday puja . . .
my husband asking for too much
and me carefully bursting the lumps in the baby's food
before which of course he is wet again (*Seablue Child* 66)

On the other hand, women who actively pursue their career over household chores are met with disdain. Menka Shivdasani in “The Whole Deal” puts forth the agony of an empowered woman through a series of violent phrases such as “hisses near your intestine”, “lava spewing from your breath”, ‘bits of breast and ovaries lying in plastic bags’ and “charred and empty space” (23). Even in the present times when women’s education and independence has received much attention, various obstructions arise in the way of their emancipation. Shivdasani weaves into plaintive images the feelings of an independent woman in the same poem thus:

It takes much to know you have
scaled the mountain, scarred yourself
with the ridges at your feet
and you have almost touched the horizon
where the sky bleeds back.
It takes a special pair of molten eyes
to see that untouched self
and to meet yourself on the other side
where the rivers flow no more
That’s when you feel empowered,
that’s when you still feel whole. (*Frazil* 11)

Women’s creative and professional achievements are frequently assessed not on autonomous terms but in proportion to the degree of marital harmony and familial stability they are perceived to sustain alongside their careers. Success, in this evaluative framework is not measured solely by intellectual merit or institutional recognition but it is mediated through the yardstick of domestic felicity. From a Marxist feminist perspective, such conditional validation reveals how patriarchal ideology continues to regulate women’s public accomplishments by tethering them to private performance. The productive self is rendered legitimate only when it does not disrupt the reproductive order.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair challenges this asymmetrical logic by contesting the gendered assumptions that naturalise inequality. Her poetic intervention calls for a decentring of patriarchal authority not merely at the level of social practice but also within language itself. By unsettling inherited idioms of dependence and subordination, she foregrounds the need to dismantle the discursive frameworks that position women as relational rather than self-determining subjects. In “Five Uneasy Pieces,” Nair destabilises the entrenched belief that a woman requires male endorsement to authenticate her personal or professional identity. The poem fractures the expectation that fulfilment must be derived from or confirmed by a masculine presence. Instead, it gestures toward an autonomous subjectivity that resists being subsumed within conjugal or patriarchal validation. Through this refusal, Nair participates in a broader contemporary Marxist feminist debate that seeks to disentangle women’s labour, creativity, and selfhood from the ideological structures that bind them to heteronormative dependence. She writes:

She wants, she badly wants
Not a fresh lover, strong-man
Or clown, but a new language
In which to hold her own. (*Hyoid Bone* 74)

Women in the Informal Sector

Frequently described as the ‘grey economy’, the informal sector operates beyond formal taxation and regulatory frameworks yet it constitutes a substantial proportion of women’s labour in India. Street vendors, domestic workers, construction labourers, sanitation workers, tea-stall assistants and brick kiln workers represent some of the most precarious segments of the female workforce. From a contemporary Marxist

feminist perspective, this sector exposes the limits of liberal feminist assumptions that equate wage earning with empowerment. It is a fact that earning does not automatically translate into autonomy when the terms of labour remain exploitative and unprotected. As Datta observes, women's bargaining power is intrinsically tied to the nature and valuation of the work they perform; since Indian women are overwhelmingly concentrated in informal employment, they remain structurally vulnerable and often doubly burdened by responsibilities inside and outside the home (152). Marxist feminism underscores that informal labour is not peripheral to capitalism but constitutive of it. It supplies cheap and flexible labour that sustains urban economies while remaining outside the purview of labour rights. Women in this sector frequently experience the convergence of productive and reproductive labour engaged in paid domestic service during the day and unpaid domestic duties within their own households at night thereby intensifying the extraction of their labour power.

The symbolic hierarchy that distinguishes corporate, medical or academic professions from sanitation, domestic service or construction work reflects a classist and gendered devaluation of certain forms of labour. Informal work is often marked as undignified or even polluting, particularly in occupations such as sanitation where caste and gender intersect to reinforce stigma. Marxist feminist debate highlights the ways in which such hierarchies are sustained through ideological processes that naturalise women's association with care, cleaning and servitude. Consequently, these forms of labour though indispensable to urban life are rendered contemptible.

The economic transition from agrarian to industrial and service-oriented modes of production has intensified rural-to-urban migration, drawing economically marginalised populations into city-based employment. Poverty, limited access to education and lack of legal literacy heighten women's susceptibility to exploitation. For instance, domestic workers perform multiple tasks like sweeping, mopping, cooking, washing and childcare often for meagre wages and without contractual security. Long working hours in inhospitable conditions, inadequate nutrition and restricted access to healthcare further entrench their vulnerability. In Marxist feminist terms, this represents a classic case of surplus value extraction under conditions where labour remains unorganised and unprotected.

The state's limited regulatory intervention in safeguarding informal women workers can be understood not only as administrative oversight but as symptomatic of structural constraints within neoliberal governance. Informality allows capital to minimise costs while transferring risk onto labourers. Thus, women in the informal sector occupy a paradoxical position that is being indispensable to economic circulation yet remaining excluded from its protections. Contemporary feminist debate therefore insists that genuine empowerment must move beyond participation in the labour market to encompass legal recognition, social security, collective bargaining rights and a revaluation of reproductive and care labour. Without such structural transformation, women's economic activity within the informal sector risks reproducing precarity rather than dismantling it.

Srilata explores the increasing dependence of working professionals on house helps and simultaneously uncovers the yearning for a better future that lurks inside the heart of these domestic helps. Gomati in moping the floor with a smiling face embodies all her fellow-women who ardently perform their duties demanding only fair monetary compensation and empathy in return. In "Gomati", the poet says:

A drudgery of four houses folds into her days.
Mine is her third.
The fourth is
"a small house where there's just dishes to do and not much work,
madam."
Gomati isn't in this for roses
and yet,
in her wake,
wild flowers blossom greedily

and every living creature lives a little more (*Arriving Shortly* 16)

Much like Gomati, Kamalamma who “is a cook at the union office” prepares food for “Busy men (who) fight causes” and “Radicals (who) abuse governments” but she alone personifies hope in a strife-stricken world:

Kamalamma posts a thousand letters
licks as many stamps
mention her husband’s muscular prowess
just in case
and serves out tea
Ten years.
The union is dead.
What has grown is Kamalamma’s drumstick tree
proving useful in a corner of the garden. (*Seablue Child* 37)

Meena Kandasamy’s “Mascara” addresses the quagmire of the sex workers more than the taboo associated with prostitution. A prostitute mechanically adorns herself every time “before she gets ready to die / once more of violation” (*Touch* 128). While a large number of prostitutes are victims of sex trafficking, the others who willingly barter their bodies for money are not protected under labour law. The prostitutes are abused, drugged, blackmailed and coerced by the procurers to render services to the clients. Kandasamy probes into one of the most underrepresented aspects of the lives of sex workers i.e. their psychological and emotional distress on being repeatedly violated. The poet says “Silently she cries”, “But still she prays” to assuage her helplessness and guilt:

Mascara. . .
it serves to tell her
that long buried
hazy dreams
of a virgin soul
have dark outlines. (128)

Conclusion

The poet predecessors were primarily engaged with questions of gender identity, domestic confinement and patriarchal control but class as a structuring determinant of women’s lived realities did not always receive sustained poetic interrogation. Twenty-first Indian English women poetry however, marks a discernible shift. It responds reflectively to the textures of everyday urban existence including local trains, vegetable markets, shopping malls, colleges, offices and crowded streets. The poets expand the feminist canvas by exploring the intersection of gender with labour, class mobility, neoliberal precarity and political economy of work. Women are first shaped within patriarchal households that privilege modesty, compliance and relational identity yet as adults they are expected to function as assertive managers, efficient team leaders and competitive professionals. This dual socialisation produces a fractured subjectivity compelling women to negotiate incompatible codes of behaviour across domestic and corporate spheres. The income they generate becomes vital not only for economic survival but also for reshaping self-perception and authority within both private and public domains. At the same time, their poetry consistently exposes persistent inequities involving unequal pay, sexual harassment, exclusion from leadership, and the relentless negotiation of work–family balance. Twenty-first century women poets broaden the frame to include the eroticisation and exoticisation of women’s presence in public spaces. Across their diverse poetic registers, these writers interrogate

patriarchal professional norms that render women vulnerable even within ostensibly modern institutions. Their demand is clear that workplaces must move toward gender-neutral, non-hierarchical structures that recognise women not as auxiliary contributors but as equal participants in economic production. The heightened awareness evident in this body of poetry emerges from the poets' own locational ethos.

By mapping the interlacing strands of gender, class, labour and urban modernity, contemporary Indian English women poets reframe the discourse of empowerment beyond mere entry into the workforce. They compel readers to recognise that genuine emancipation requires structural transformation of organisational cultures, labour policies and social attitudes alike. Equally, the poems show the necessity for women to relinquish the internalised imperative of perfection across both domestic and professional spheres, a demand that capitalism and patriarchy jointly sustain. True empowerment will emerge not from individual resilience alone but from a fundamental reconfiguration of workspaces and value systems that acknowledges care, equity, and dignity as integral to economic life.

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